

The future of the university museums' system in Italy

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Resumo

Este artigo descreve os mais recentes desenvolvimentos da Rede de Museus Universitários Italiana, nomeadamente os primeiros resultados do levantamento e da base de dados de museus e colecções. Propõe a reunião das colecções sob a tutela de uma fundação cultural e defende a necessidade de cooperação inter-universitária no sentido de partilha de conhecimentos e equipamentos e maior facilidade de acesso a financiamento. Os recentes acontecimentos, conferências e reuniões sobre património arquitectónico na Europa constituem ainda uma oportunidade para a discussão da criação de um pólo de colecções universitárias de arquitectura em Itália.

Abstract

This paper discusses the recent developments of the Italian Network of University Museums, starting with the first results of the census and database of the existing structures and collections. Proposals for the gathering of collections in a cultural foundation are presented, focusing on the possible forms of inter-university cooperation aimed to create strong scientific poles of the territorial network in order to share knowledge and equipment and find easier access to financial support. Recent European and international events, conferences, and meetings on the cultural architectural heritage will offer the opportunity to introduce the project of creating an Italian 'pole' of the architectural and drawings university collections.

Italian network of university museums: first results

Around three years after its launch, the project by the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) of setting up a network of university museums and scientific collections is nearing the completion of its preliminary phase – the survey of the country's rich cultural heritage. The data thus collected shall constitute the basis for the creation of a national catalogue of university museums. So far, data have confirmed that the Italian heritage is both rich and of outstanding value, documenting the history of Italian university research in a variety of fields. The multifarious nature and composition of Italian university museums have also been confirmed, as have their diverse organisational and management regimes.

Data collection is still in progress, as responses from 41 universities out of a total of 77 have not yet been received, among which such important institutions as University of Rome's Tor Vergata and University of Venice's Ca' Foscari. We also have learned that five universities possess no museum structure or collection. As of 30 May 2002, a total of 170 museums and 343 collections had been added to the list¹.

The overall results of the activity of CRUI's Museums Committee are positive. The campaign aimed at both large and small universities has succeeded in raising awareness among those in charge about the importance of the preservation of the teaching and research heritage. In fact, even at institutions lacking museums or collections – often in younger and smaller universities – surveys and cataloguing of samples, experiments,

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¹ See <http://www1.crui.it/musei/>

equipment and tools have been planned or undertaken, providing interesting contributions.

The central aim of the project² is to provide a modern and efficient model for both the management and the fruition of this heritage through the setting up of 'university museum systems'. The project also intends to promote the creation in all universities of 'museum centres' by streamlining resources and sharing activities to promote extant material. The national network of university museums will bring together old and new universities by coordinating the nationally and internationally renowned collections of the former with the resources and the potential of the latter. An efficient network is required to promote consistent and profitable cooperation and links between members as well as between members and international agencies and centres. The same degree of efficiency is needed to facilitate the exchange of information regarding the contents of each museum and its cultural initiatives, for which there is a potentially limitless public. Advanced university

structures equipped to carry out well-planned activities and employing adequately qualified staff are necessary to achieve these aims. These will include key centres responsible for documentation, research, teaching and the diffusion of knowledge, aiming at offering services on cataloguing, editing, creating multi-medial products, conservation and restoration, training, etc.

The Committee's bid to go beyond the traditional concept of museum and to set up museums in novel places and structures that show a keen interest in the communication of scientific culture to a wider public has largely succeeded.

In this context, the feasibility study undertaken by the Committee, due to be completed in March 2003, is all the more interesting. Using the data from the ongoing survey mentioned above, it aims at describing the current situation and at finding tools and methods suitable for the creation of a national network of 'university museum systems', which

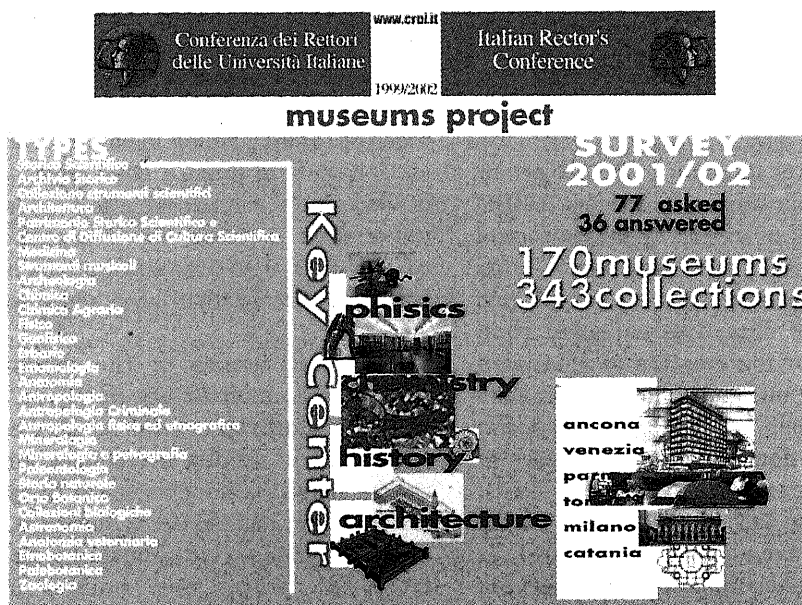


Fig. 1 – Opening page of the u-museums' and collections' database hosted by the Conference of Italian Rectors.

² Presented at the Paris Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development meeting (PUGNALONI 2001).

should permit consistent dialogue and collaboration among very different structures. The main steps of the feasibility study are:

- a) the design of an easily accessible and user-friendly web portal allowing prompt information retrieval – typically of catalogue and bibliographic data – regarding university museums and collections and suggesting theme routes and specific communication tools;
- b) the planning of training initiatives connected with the new functions related to university museum structures. A survey of ongoing initiatives shall serve as the basis to design models of training courses;
- c) the establishment of innovative methods of preserving and promoting the historical and scientific heritage of universities;
- d) the planning of adequate communication campaigns to help promote museum resources and the activities of museum structures, the support of university teaching and research and the diffusion and growth of scientific culture;

- e) the identification of a set of evaluation indices or standards to be proposed both to the single universities for experimental adoption by free adhesion and to the reference Administrations for possible approval and adoption at the national level. Such indices and standards should be compatible with those established by the relevant ministries and specifically adapted to university museums, archives, and collection centres of historical and scientific importance.

The museums network could also enhance the connection with other national and international initiatives. The feasibility study intends to illustrate how existing experiences and abilities can be harnessed to the future project, as well as to insert the university museum systems into theme or geographical networks working in the sector of university museums.

The foundation of a 'National Institute for University Museums Systems', or other appropriate legal entity guaranteeing the access to funds and contributions, is being evaluated. This body would be in charge of

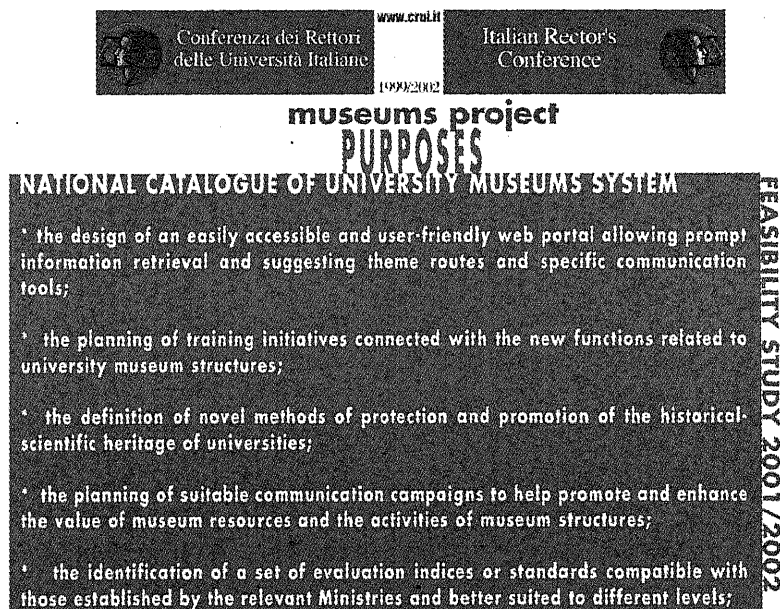


Fig. 2 – A detail of the same website, stating the purposes of the database.

coordinating the museum-related activities of universities, safeguarding and promoting their heritage, guaranteeing an adequate financial support enabling greater autonomy from university financing. In addition, the National Institute could stimulate the establishment in younger institutions of departments engaged in appropriate action in the field of museums and public understanding of science. In fact, these contributions will not only add to the existing collections, however prestigious, and help towards their maintenance, but they shall also stimulate the creation of new ones in younger universities.

The pole of architectural museums and collections

For optimum effectiveness, the national network of university museums systems shall need to identify suitable structures in each interest area, capable of performing the required functions and offering services to both universities and third parties. The project of a 'Pole of Architectural Museums and Collections', recently advanced by some Italian Universities (Ancona, Venice, Parma, Catania, Turin Polytechnic, Milan Polytechnic), is to be seen in this light. This theme pole aims at working with established networks and institutions such as AAA Italia (Archives of Contemporary Architecture) and ICAM (International Confederation of Architectural Museums). The objectives of the 'Pole of Architectural Museums and Collections' are: i) to undertake a survey of existing collections and to catalogue the material (architectural drawings and surveys, photographs, slides, models, video material, CD-ROMs, DVDs) through the adoption of common standards and the exchange of professional skills and experience; ii) training of specialised personnel; iii) sharing of equipment; iv) organisation of joint research projects; and v) organisation of travelling exhibitions as well as virtual ones.

ICAM is a privileged partner. Founded in Helsinki in 1979 in response to the emerging view of architectural museums as distinct institutions, ICAM

has recently started collaborating with our Department (Architecture Environment Drawing Urbanism History of the Engineering Faculty of the University of Ancona, Italy), particularly as far as the drawings archives are concerned. ICAM is a forum for professionals involved in preserving and exhibiting architectural records. It is devoted to fostering links among all those interested in promoting the better understanding of architecture. The term 'confederation' has been chosen to describe the loose-knit character of architectural museums, centres, archives, collections, libraries and other institutions fulfilling the conditions of its statutes. Members share expertise and information about institutions, exhibitions, publications, architectural documents, and other matters of common interest. ICAM is an affiliated organisation to the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and also has special links with the International Council of Archives (ICA).

Concluding remarks

New economic models and changing ownerships of museums (state, municipal, foundation, private) have emerged. New mission statements have been discussed in many museums. The involvement of museums in developing tourist industries, how they both compete and cooperate with other cultural institutions, the modernisation of museums and the improvement of their professionalism, the need to increase their institutional autonomy and the role of the state in preserving the collections – all these questions and many others are currently the subject of lively discussions in European museums.

How do architecture museums and architecture centres meet the needs of contemporary societies? What new initiatives, innovative ideas and programmes have been offered by them for professionals and for the public? What tools (economic models, cooperation programmes) have been adopted to make architecture museums active and visible in contemporary cultural life? These and other questions should be discussed.

Reference

PUGNALONI, F. 2001. A regional system of university museums. In: M. KELLY (ed.) *Managing university museums: education and skills*, pp. 79-83. OECD, Paris.